

The Sun: Freespace

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Poverty in the midst of our plenty

Petra Gimbad

KUALA LUMPUR can be an odd place: where wealth and poverty sit side-by-side. Reading this did not make sense till I left Malaysia. Upon my return, I noticed for the first time the distorted scenery: KLCC, a symbol of our success, surrounded by squatters. I was confronted by this image wherever I drove. School taught us to take pride in our country's economic progress. Development, however, has not lifted everyone out of poverty and its effects.

I once knew a girl whose mother experienced breast pains. Breast cancer had killed her grandmother. Cajoling her mother to the doctor proved useless: Mak cakap, buat apa? Kalau ada apa-apa pun, bayar bagaimana? ("What's the point? Even if they find something, how are we to pay?") Sickness and death were not alien to her, having lost a brother to a "mysterious" illness a few years before. Apparently, he was fine one day, and died the next. It was years before it dawned on me that he was aware of his illness, but suffered quietly. For what good can talk do?

Poverty impacts choice: My mother told me of a girl who could not afford more than a meal a day. It was not uncommon for many girls in her situation to survive each day on a packet of Maggi noodles. For the few years they attend school, they travel by foot for an hour or two to their classroom, and another hour or two back. They drop out young, to feed their families. The few jobs available offer miniscule wages and scant chance of promotion.

Friends and I once tutored at a children's home which was extremely rundown - horrifyingly unsanitary (lice and scabies were common), and with more children than space. We would teach a child how to add and subtract numbers, returning only to discover that all was forgotten. The cycle was endless; these children lacked what we thought was normal: parents who bought books and sat down to teach, tutors when we struggled in school. Most of the kids did not complete their homework, because they did not know how. (One of the boys circumvented punishment by getting - I suspected bullying - a friend to do his homework.) Many teachers, I knew, would tell them off for laziness without acknowledging that the problem goes far deeper than that. When you do not have self-esteem, you will not believe yourself capable of anything. This was what hurt most: their adamant inability to believe in themselves. Studying requires faith that if one works hard enough, the answers will come. The children gave up all too easily in the face of math problems like $21 - 9 = ?$ or writing one-line sentences in English, a language that is hard to grasp without sufficient exposure and patient teaching.

I had too many friends in school who believed they were stupid for performing dismally in math and English. Their ability to pass exams in spite of the little support they received was amazing. Our school system often allocates classes by exam grades. Placing the poorest achieving students into a single class can backfire, for they automatically earn the

labels of dummies and no-gooders. As a temporary teacher, I was told by one teacher after another: "Oh, you're teaching `that class'? Don't even bother trying.

Seriously! They memang tak guna one! (They're really useless!)" A more patient colleague pointed out in all seriousness:

"Actually, kasihan (pity) these kids - their parents are poor, work all the time, no time to watch their kids, keep them out of trouble." Pause. "These will grow up to become your VCD sellers."

In the showdown between life and money, life can be worthless. These stories - people I know - cause me to grit my teeth when I listen to others talk about "the noble suffering of the poor".

It is cheap to give someone admiration, when there is cash to spare. In a country where the poverty line for a monthly household income is RM510, the poor have no need of words. What they deserve is what others have: a chance at life, with the choices many of us take for granted.

Petra likes feminism, social justice, and working on the online magazine, Vox. She is a law student in her spare time.

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